



A Final Word on Self-Examination

J.C. Ryle said of George Whitefield's sermons: *"There was no getting away from them ... There was a holy violence about him which firmly took your attention by storm."*¹ Whitefield expected fruits from his targeted sermons; he once asked the Lord in his diary what was wrong when two weeks went by without any word of conversions under his ministry.

One of the problems of the contemporary pulpit is that we shoot over or around our targets with half-hearted zeal, scarcely expecting God to work conversions through our sermons. There is a jarring contrast between the serious nature of the message proclaimed and the casual and even offhand way in which it is delivered. Preachers who convey the impression that they have no particular targets to shoot and nothing especially important to say should not be surprised if no one gives them any serious attention.

Spurgeon put it this way: *"Some preachers remind me of the famous Chinese jugglers, one of whom stood against a wall and the other threw knives at him. One knife would be driven into the board just above his head, and another close by his ear, while under his armpit and between his fingers quite a number of deadly weapons were bristling. Wonderful art to be able to throw to a hair's breadth and never strike! How many among us have a marvelous skill in missing!"*²

As we target different groups in our churches, our manner of preaching ought to confirm the seriousness of our message. The Westminster Assembly divines understood this fundamental link between style and substance. They conclude their discussion on preaching in the *Directory for the Public Worship of God* by taking up the matter of style, charging all preachers that both their preaching and ministry must be performed in the spirit of these seven marks:

- (1) *painfully*, that is, painstakingly, not negligently;
- (2) *plainly*, so that the most uneducated may be able to grasp the teaching of Scripture;
- (3) *faithfully*, yearning for the honor of Christ, the salvation of the lost, and the edification of believers;
- (4) *wisely*, teaching and admonishing in a manner most apt to prevail with the parishioners;
- (5) *gravely*, as becomes the Word;
- (6) *lovingly*, with godly zeal and hearty desire for the welfare of souls;
- (7) *earnestly*, being inwardly persuaded of the truth of Christ and walking before the flock in a godly manner, both privately and publicly.³

If these seven qualities were exemplified more fully in today's preaching and ministry, would we not see more of the transforming power of the Word of God in the churches?

Ministers must seek grace to build the house of God with their preaching and their life. *"Truth is in order to godliness,"* said the Old School Presbyterians. Doctrine must produce life, and life must adorn doctrine. We preachers must be what we preach and teach. We must not only apply ourselves to our texts, but we must also apply our texts to ourselves. *"He doth preach most,"* writes John Boys, *"that doth live best."* Perhaps Robert Murray M'Cheyne said it best: *"A minister's life is the life of his ministry ... In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument,*

will be the success. It is not great talents that God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”⁴

Like our Puritan forebears, we need to repent of our lack of gravity in preaching and in living. In 1651, only six years after the *Directory for the Public Worship* was first published in 1645, the Church of Scotland drew up a list of the sins of the ministry that needed confessing. Horatius Bonar summarizes this necessity in *Words to Winners of Souls*, saying:

“We have been unfaithful, carnal, unspiritual, selfish, lazy, cold, and timid. We have been lacking in solemnity. We have preached ourselves, not Christ. We have used words of man’s wisdom. We have not fully preached a free gospel. We have not duly studied and honored the Word of God. We have not been men of prayer. We have not honored the Spirit of God. We have had little of the mind of Christ.”⁵

As we preach, targeting our audience with Spirit-directed wisdom, striving to be an embodiment of what we preach both in public and in private, let us first target ourselves, for revival must begin with us. Let us repent of our personal and ministerial sins, love the people entrusted to us, and pray earnestly that God will make our preaching effective, to the upbuilding of His kingdom and the pulling down of the strongholds of Satan. When our own consciences become our first target and we can say with John Bunyan that we preach no truth we do not first feel within ourselves, we may see better days ahead for the church of Jesus Christ.

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Endnotes:

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 53.

² Charles Spurgeon, *All-Round Ministry* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 117-18.

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 381.

⁴ Adapted from Joel R. Beeke and Ray Lanning, “The Transforming Power of Scripture,” in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 252-53.

⁵ Horatius Bonar, *Words to Winners of Souls* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1995), 34-48.